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"Story with an Hypothesis": women and war in Sylvia Townsend Warner's forgotten short story

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"Story with an Hypothesis": women and war in Sylvia Townsend Warner's forgotten short story

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“Story with an Hypothesis”: women and war in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s forgotten short story

Originally published in a British interwar periodical, Sylvia Townsend Warner’s short story, “Story with an Hypothesis” (1935), has never been collected. This critical introduction seeks to refocus attention on the story and argues for its importance in Warner’s oeuvre as a transitional feminist text. “Story with an Hypothesis” reflects Warner’s mid-1930s anxieties about war’s likely effects on women and represents her recognition that the threat of war required women’s liberation to be imagined and narrated differently. In the 1920s, much of Warner’s work was characterized by what Mary Jacobs has called “fantastic ruralism”, a mode of pastoral writing with which Warner imagined natural spaces as liberating women from urban, patriarchal modernity. This introduction argues that “Story with an Hypothesis” constitutes both an example of fantastic ruralism and a feminist dramatization of its limitations in an era of looming war. In its representation of its protagonist’s failure to escape her militaristic partner’s control, despite the liberating potential of its country setting, the story signals Warner’s abandonment of fantastic ruralism and foreshadows her 1936 novel, *Summer Will Show*, in which women’s liberation is contingent not on withdrawal into rural solitude, but on migration to the centre of political and social crisis.

Keywords: Sylvia Townsend Warner; women; war; interwar; feminism; short story

Introduction

In the mid-1930s, Sylvia Townsend Warner became increasingly concerned by the looming threat of war and its likely impact on women. Unlike the First World War, which was overwhelmingly fought on battlefields by men, the next war would put women’s lives at risk in air raids on civilian targets. Warner developed a new narrative mode with which to imagine women’s liberation in these years of rising masculine militarism. Abandoning her 1920s narratives, which imagined women’s liberation as a withdrawal from patriarchal modernity into natural spaces, Warner envisaged liberation as depending upon women’s political participation. She began this aesthetic process in

"Story with an Hypothesis", a short story that appeared in the February 1935 issue of *The London Mercury*, a British literary periodical.

A significant element of Warner's oeuvre, "Story with an Hypothesis" has nevertheless been neglected. It appeared neither in *A Garland of Straw* (1943), a collection that included many 1930s short stories, nor in any other collection published during her lifetime. Although Warner's fiction, like that of many British interwar women writers, was republished by Virago in the late 1970s, "Story with an Hypothesis" was not included in the publisher's *Selected Stories* (1990). (In fact, it has only been reprinted in one venue: the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter*, in 2003.)

The story's neglect is unfortunate, as it provides valuable insight into an important transitional phase in Warner's literary career. In its rural setting and depiction of Anastasia, a solitary woman engaging in a creative relationship to nature, "Story with an Hypothesis" has much in common with Warner's writing of the 1920s and early 1930s. However, Anastasia's domination by Edmund, a sinister figure associated throughout the text with war, departs from Warner's previous representations of natural spaces as sites of women's potential liberation. The story thus illustrates Warner's under-recognized convictions about how liberation should be imagined and narrated in a period characterized by war's looming threat.

Women's liberation and natural spaces

Warner's early focus on natural spaces and their liberatory potential for women developed partly from her own experience. Living in London in 1922, she visited the Essex Marshes for the first time. Her biographer, Claire Harman, has described this trip's profound effect on Warner's identity and creativity:

> The visit to the marshes marked a change in Sylvia; she felt, as she was to say later, that she had become properly her own person, having been till then "the creature of whoever I was with" […] In Essex that hot August she drew breath, took stock and in her mood of "passionate quiescence" was surprised by "the discovery that it was possible to write poetry". Her stay lasted a month, but the poetry continued to be "possible" all the rest of her life.[1]

Warner's solitary walking through the Essex marsh landscape enabled her to attain an autonomy and self-knowledge that life in London had not been able to provide. This process acted as a catalyst for Warner's literary creativity – her first poetry collection, *The Espalier*, would be published three years later in 1925, followed by her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, in 1926. In that novel, Laura Willowes, like her creator, liberates herself from London's stultifying modernity and moves to the rural Chilterns, where she achieves independence and freedom as a witch, deriving pleasure from a close relationship to the natural world.

Lolly Willowes exemplifies what Mary Jacobs calls Warner's "fantastic ruralism".[2] Arguing that this mode of writing characterized much of Warner's work between 1925 and 1934, Jacobs points to Warner's 1929 novel, *The True Heart*, to illustrate the difference between fantastic ruralism and other types of pastoral writing. Jacobs contends that the "shifting and liminal marsh landscape" in which *The True Heart* is set

> eludes containment by the fruitfulness and order of the Georgic vision. Those aspects of the text's representation of the rural imply a different politics in which gendered analysis and narrative experiment produce a fantastic ruralism at odds with a Georgic aesthetic.[3]

Warner's fantastic ruralism rejected the harmonious, though implicitly patriarchal, rural community imagined by the Georgic tradition, in favour of wilder natural spaces better suited to modernist explorations of women's experience. In *Lolly Willowes*, Laura's

escape from London is also an escape from the patriarchal control of her older brother, in whose household she lives as a "maiden aunt", and the freedom she secures for herself is threatened when her nephew, Titus, follows her to the Chilterns.

As well as these two 1920s novels, Jacobs also sees fantastic ruralism as characterizing Warner's poetry of the period, including *The Espalier*, her long narrative poem, *Opus 7* (1931), and *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1934), a collection jointly authored with her partner, Valentine Ackland. Warner's collaboration with Ackland on a fantastic ruralist text reflects the direction of the two women's lives: in 1930, they had withdrawn from London to a cottage in rural Dorset, where they lived happily for decades in a lesbian partnership.[4] Warner, the more successful writer, used *Whether a Dove or Seagull* as a way of getting Ackland's work into publication.[5] However, Ackland had an equally significant impact on Warner's career: it was she that first took an interest in the rise of fascism and the threat of war, alerting a hitherto relatively complacent Warner and beginning a process of aesthetic change.[6]

"Story with an Hypothesis" extends our understanding of Warner's fantastic ruralism. Anastasia, too, escapes from urban modernity (represented by the car), the speed and noise of which oppress her by making thought and memory impossible. Like Laura Willowes, she finds freedom in the countryside's quiet stillness, also resembling her fictional precursor in her knowledge of botany and folk wisdom. However, the ending of "Story with an Hypothesis" diverges from earlier instances of Warner's fantastic ruralism by placing Anastasia back under Edmund's patriarchal control. The natural world no longer provides a liberatory space for women. This shift reflects Warner's anxieties about the rising threat of war in the mid-1930s.

War's new threat to women

Fears about fascism's rise in Europe and the likelihood of another war increased with

Hitler's coming to power in Germany in 1933. Interwar British women knew that any future war would have new gendered consequences, as noted by the historian Julie Gottlieb:

> The female experience came to be differentiated from the male in so far as the whole rhetoric and mindset was dominated by the views that […] women and children would be at once the more vulnerable and defenceless in the face of modern warfare (the bomber will always get through).[7]

Total war's targeting of civilians, witnessed for the first time in Abyssinia from 1935 and Spain from 1936, meant primarily the targeting by men of women and the children for whom they cared. Further, British women remained excluded from the armed forces, preventing them from military participation.[8]

This political context sharpened Warner's opposition to war and fascism. Early in 1935 she and Ackland joined the Communist Party and immediately became involved in political activism.[9] For Warner, much of this activism had an anti-war orientation: in June 1936 she was elected Secretary of the Dorset Peace Council and, in September that year, was a delegate to an international peace congress in Brussels.[10] Warner signed an open letter to the feminist weekly, *Time and Tide*, which was also signed by other prominent writers including Rose Macaulay, Rebecca West and the pacifist Aldous Huxley, which emphasized the dangers faced by largely helpless non-combatants:

> It is on civilians that war will in future have its most lethal effect. Danger they will face, but danger against which they can take no stimulating action. They will merely be poisoned, burned, blown to pieces, buried under heaps of masonry, or starved.[11]

Here, the word "civilians" is ungendered, but to Warner and other interwar women it would have been clear who the majority of those civilians would be.

These new threats to women saw Warner turn away from fantastic ruralism and toward new ways of imagining and narrating women's liberation. Her 1936 historical novel, *Summer Will Show*, features a Victorian-era protagonist, Sophia Willoughby, who seeks liberation from her respectable life as a member of the Dorset gentry (she holds sole responsibility for raising her children and running her estate, while her irresponsible husband is in Paris with his mistress). Like Laura Willowes before her, Sophia first seeks release from stifling domesticity in the English countryside, when she escorts her nephew to boarding school in Cornwall:

> There was no doubt that, in some unsuspected way, she could have been very happy at Trebennick. That air, so pure and earthy, absolved one back into animal, washed off all recollection of responsibilities; one waft of wind there would blow away the cares from one's mind, the petticoats from one's legs, demolish all the muffle of imposed personality loaded upon one by other people, leaving one free, swift, unburdened as a fox.[12]

The fox simile suggests that closeness to the natural world may result in liberation and autonomy for Sophia, freeing her from restrictions placed on her life by gendered social roles (pointedly represented by the metaphor of petticoats restricting her legs' movement). However, Sophia's attempt to find freedom in Cornwall, when she decides on a whim to spend a day walking alone in the countryside, is frustrated:

> She had still more than an hour of liberty before she must remember the second train and walk back; yet already a liberty in which she had nothing to do was irksome to her. Should she walk further, paddle her feet in the stream? The one was pointless, the other childish. It was boring to be a woman, nothing that one did had any meat in it […] The stream kept her company down the valley, an idle influence, turning no mill-wheels, running happily to waste. She had drunk of it; but she could not drink of its brilliant peace.[13]

Rather than finding liberation in her rare, solitary experience of nature, Sophia finds

only dissatisfaction. Like the stream that runs freely but doesn't turn mill-wheels, Sophia herself is without purpose or usefulness beyond the social roles prescribed to upper-class women: child-rearing and the day-to-day running of her household. To find true liberation from patriarchal society, Sophia must leave the countryside behind for the revolutionary Paris of 1848. There, she falls in love with her husband's mistress, Minna, a bohemian revolutionary and storyteller. In the urban tumult of Paris, Sophia liberates herself sexually and socially, abandoning her old life for a lesbian partnership with Minna and a new existence as a communist.

Summer Will Show left behind the fantastic ruralism of Warner's earlier work because it could no longer address the most urgent causes of women's oppression under the looming threat of total war in the mid-1930s. Sophia achieves liberation not by withdrawing into remote natural spaces to live a creative, solitary life, but by migrating to the centre of political and social crisis, to participate in building a better world. To address the effects of war and extreme nationalism on women, Warner had to imagine and narrate forms of liberation that were communal and participatory, not solitary and detached. Refocusing attention on "Story with an Hypothesis" is important because it dramatizes this reorientation in Warner's work: it is both an example of fantastic ruralism and a text that exposes its limitations. This reorientation reflects new attempts in the 1930s to combine politics and aesthetics in what Nick Hubble calls 'proletarian literature', which focussed

> on the intersubjective connections between the worker and people of other classes. Sometimes these others were the upper-middle-class men of the Auden Generation who had 'gone over' to the side of the workers and the books were written from their perspective.[14]

In its depiction of Sophia's social descent into the Paris masses, *Summer Will Show* shares similarities with books by upper-middle-class male writers, such as George

Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). However, Warner's novel differs from such books by analysing gendered social relations, as well as class-based ones, reflecting an intersectional approach that characterised novels such as Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) and (as Hubble argues) Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (1935).

The countryside, militarism and patriarchal control

The fantastic ruralist elements of "Story with an Hypothesis" cohere around Anastasia. The story begins with her relief at leaving the car, the text's primary symbol of modernity. Anastasia imagines herself "expanded and immemorial as the trees above her, rooted in quiet grass like them",[15] a striking echo of *Lolly Willowes*, in which Laura, in an epiphanic moment, finds her desire weighing "upon her like the load of ripened fruit upon a tree […] She seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass".[16] As Anastasia enters the woods, her sense of freedom is immediate: "Without much interest but with a certain sense of elation, her mind began to frame projects and flip them away again. There was really a considerable choice of what to do next".[17] This sense of autonomy, possibility, and happiness leads to creative engagement with the natural world around her. Coming across a flower she doesn't know, she invents a simile for it: "Edmund would know its name, a tiny white flower, a fine speckle of blossom like the stars in the Milky Way".[18] Anastasia substitutes the flower's name for an imaginative association between small and enormous natural phenomena, identifying objects separated in space with one another.

During her walk, Anastasia again makes identifications across spatial distances, which have the potential to address rising militarism and nationalism. The sight of an elder tree inspires connections between Norse mythology, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, and the elder tree's medicinal properties and etymology. Then, recalling

botanical information about the tree, she reflects that "its habitat is Northern Europe. But how far north? – are there, for instance, elder-trees in Iceland?"[19] Drawing on Scandinavian literature and imagining a natural habitat stretching from Norfolk to Iceland, Anastasia subverts the political borders that were, in 1935, the subject of intensified policing and contestation. Here, Anastasia diverges from Laura Willowes, who, as Jane Garrity notes, "consolidates her Englishness through identification with the beauty of the landscape".[20] Rather than reinforcing her national identity, Anastasia imagines a shared culture and natural environment extending across northern Europe, through her solitary engagement with the Norfolk countryside.

However, the story's fantastic ruralism and its potential for addressing the threat war posed to women are brought to an end by Edmund's sudden appearance. Throughout the story, Anastasia associates Edmund with interwar militarism in various ways. Anastasia recalls him talking "often of his native county, his finger trudging over ordnance maps, showing her where, one day, they would go to visit together the places of his boyhood".[21] Edmund's use of cartographic representations to understand Norfolk, which contrasts with Anastasia's immersion of herself in its countryside, gestures towards maps' popularity in interwar Britain, which Garrity relates to militarism and imperialism:

> We see evidence of the map's links with rapaciousness and war during the interwar period in Britain's map-selling boom, which was fuelled by public anxiety surrounding the rise of militarism. The prominent geographer Vaughan Cornish intended that his book *A Geography of Imperial Defence* (1922) be read by both the military specialist and the layman, for "Imperial Military Geography" was "eminently a Citizen's Subject". Indeed, the geography textbook series that British schoolchildren studied during the interwar years, *The Conquest Geographies*, featured maps that represented a decidedly Anglocentric perspective on global dominance and control.[22]

The map's association with empire, borders and military power links this memory of Edmund to another one, in which, while Anastasia was playing on a Norfolk beach as a child, Edmund was "stumping out with his first gun".[23] While Anastasia's relationship to nature subverts political borders by establishing cultural and botanical continuities, Edmund's reinforces them: he understands the countryside, through representations of it, as territory to be demarcated and plundered for its resources. In this context, we can understand the simile Warner uses to describe Edmund when he first appears: "in the shade of the trees his eyes, small and vivid, had the glitter of a sword in good condition".[24] Edmund's eyes, weapon-like, view the world in a warlike way.

Anastasia's liberation by the Norfolk countryside, as well as the imaginative associations she develops through engagement with it, cannot withstand Edmund's presence. He immediately subordinates her to his control, closing down the sense of freedom and possibility she had enjoyed alone. Warner represents this tension through modernist use of free indirect discourse. Although the story begins in a conventional third-person narrative mode, a shift takes place when Anastasia begins her walk: "A little farther along the road stood a cottage, and from the cottage came a smell of frying onions. It must be lunch-time, midday probably, since cottage people eat early".[25] The equivocal nature of the second sentence ("must", "probably") indicates that we are no longer in an omniscient narrator's presence, but are inhabiting Anastasia's subjectivity as readers. However, when she meets Edmund, conventional third-person narration resumes, obscuring Anastasia's interiority. She becomes an object, onto which Edmund is able to impose "facts, which he considered of importance".[26] Anastasia's creative and imaginative impulses are shut down, and she ends the story listening to Edmund expound on the conditions by which ghosts can become visible to the living. An example of Warner's dry feminist wit, this ending satirizes the male propensity to

analyse the world in positivist terms by having Edmund treat the supernatural as a scientific phenomenon.

In "Story with an Hypothesis", the liberatory potential of Warner's fantastic ruralism is foreshortened by the entry of a masculine, militaristic presence into the natural space of its setting. Edmund renders temporary Anastasia's sense of freedom and possibility, which makes possible imaginative acts that could challenge militarism, ensuring that she passively accepts his understanding of the (super)natural world. By 1935, Warner found that narratives of withdrawal into nature were no longer adequate to the task of imagining women's freedom and autonomy, which, menaced by new threats of war, required new narratives of social and political participation.

"Story with an Hypothesis" by Sylvia Townsend Warner

After the noise and speed of the car – a speed that was rendered trifling and unreal by the car being a closed car – the stillness of the country road was quite extraordinary. It was as though the whole world were standing still – a solid and positive stillness, an everlasting element in which trees grew and flowers were plaited among the wayside grasses.

The place where she had so abruptly quitted the car was a long stretch of road with wide grassy margins. A double row of irregularly spaced trees made it almost as formal as an avenue, and the tall stone park gate at the end of the perspective corroborated this aspect of what was, in truth, but a straight stretch of unfrequented road in Norfolk. "Somewhere near Cromer," she said to herself, looking about her. But after all that was only a guess; she had really no notion where she was. During the long drive she had remained quite indifferent to the country through which she was conveyed, except once or twice, when a name on a signpost had signalled itself to her memory as a name which she had heard spoken by Edmund. He talked often of his native county, his

finger trudging over ordnance maps, showing her where, one day, they would go to visit together the places of his boyhood.

But names then, they were still only names. The car hastened on, the by-roads were swept aside by its speed, the continuous conversation kept up by Elfrida and Nancy overlaid any stir of memory, any quickening of thought.

Now the utmost she could say to herself was, "Somewhere in North Norfolk, somewhere near Cromer," Cromer she knew. At the time when Edmund was stumping out with his first gun she, with her spade and bucket had played, intently and stealthily, as solitary children play, on that chilly beach. The summer following the tide of holiday had cast her upon another strand, and from that day to this she had not set foot in Norfolk.

A little farther along the road stood a cottage, and from the cottage came a smell of frying onions. It must be lunch-time, midday probably, since cottage people eat early. Time, though, troubled her as little as place. All her sense of being was absorbed in the relief of being out of that car, alone, in this world that stood so still. She seemed to herself expanded and immemorial as the trees above her, rooted in quiet grass like them, like them secure from human cares and human conversation.

For how those two women had talked! Zealously, brightly, ruthlessly keeping up their conversation, so that she, staring at the red, hair-prickled neck of the hired driver had thought of his silence as of a garden into which she might gaze but could never enter.

Well, they were gone! Recalling the driver, so red, and young, and sturdy, she felt a momentary pang, but she could feel no regret for Elfrida and Nancy. They were gone, she had escaped them, and was, as far as she could gather, free – free, should she please to do, to do as she pleased. The motionless world was before her, and all this

motionless day, poised on its midsummer noon. For it was the Eve of Saint John, when one could gather fern-seed and walk invisible.

Without much interest but with a certain sense of elation, as though she had come into a pair of wings, her mind began to frame projects and flip them away again. There was really a considerable choice of what to do next. She might, for instance, enter a lunatic asylum and settle down there. She would be perfectly inoffensive, and a long unmolested leisure in which to study lunatics might be very tolerable. Or some sort of nocturnal nature study might be entertaining. She might slide herself into a bird sanctuary – there was one in Norfolk, Edmund had spoken of it, called Horsey Mere. To sleep all day and watch birds at night, there was nothing in that which people could object to, and the nocturnal behaviour of birds is a subject little explored. Or, of course, like so many others in her position, she might travel.

Meanwhile, she began to walk down a small track which led across the grass margin of the road towards a plantation. It was the sort of path just kept going by the usage of, perhaps, a dozen people a week – children birds'-nesting or brambling, a woman gathering an apronful of sticks, a gamekeeper, a tramp. Their usage had not been enough to tread out the flower growing underfoot. Edmund would know its name, a tiny white flower, a fine speckle of blossom like the stars in the Milky Way.

The plantation thickened about her, but the path kept on, small and steadfast. Looking back she saw it receding from her heels. "It follows me like a tame wild animal," she thought.

There were a number of young poplars, their leaves lined with woolly silver. The smell of their bark was pungent under the sun, a smell at once savage and innocent. The larger, more separate stars of stitchwort spangled the grass on either side of the track, a few dog-roses were still in bloom, bleached by the sun.

It was astonishingly silent. But one could not expect bird-song now, for the elder-tree was in bloom; and *Between elder-blossom and elder-fruit birds are mostly mute.* That was one of the rhymes so unexpectedly made up by Edmund to impress on her memory facts, which he considered of importance. They came out of him, round, sudden, unexpected and complete; like button-mushrooms. And all around the button-mushroom the surface remained exactly as it had been, so that no one looking at Edmund would surmise for a moment that he was capable of poetry.

"Mostly mute," she said aloud, staring at the elder-tree, so luxuriantly in flower, foaming out on every side with its exact, lace-pattern, flat-faced bucklers of yellow-white blossom. Under the blossom and the dark-green leaves were the elder-wands, the straight rods of this year's growth, whose outer pith could be delicately peeled off with a knife, leaving a pattern of green and white. Country lovers would make such wands for their young women, spending an hour, maybe, incising the pattern, breathing heavily, with pursed lips. There was a quantity of most promising wands in this bush, long, straight, unknuckled, as they should be. She hoped that some young man would bring his young lady here and make her an elder-wand.

She walked on, but the scent of the elder-blossom followed her; and she set her mind to recollect all the things she knew about the elder tree. Wine and jelly can be made of the fruit, a face-wash from the blossom, steeped in spring-water; and from the dried blossoms a tea can be distilled, which is said to cure colds and fevers, this was the tea made for the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen, among the fumes of which the Elder-Tree Mother appeared and told stories to the sick child. Hulda, or Hildre, a Norse Goddess; and in Norfolk the elder is called hilder to this day.

How true it was that one should collect as much miscellaneous information as possible, storing it away against the hour of need! – from these casual musings on the

elder-tree she had plaited herself something like comfort. Yes, this was undoubtedly what people meant when they spoke of the pleasures of memory. To those who have endless time to pass away and dare not think too near to heart, such fragments of information, however slight, however childish, were a blessing indeed – could be woven, as tufts of moss and oddments of hair and feathers are woven to line a birds' nest, into a warm kind of cubby-hole for the mind.

"A remedy in every hedge, either for sickness or wound." So Evelyn had written of the elder, kind tree! Nor had she yet exhausted its virtues, she could stay a little longer under its shelter, although the two vistas of Hans Christian Andersen and Northern mythology opened so promisingly between its branches. She could consider it botanically. Its leaves are pinnate, its blossoms of the order called cyme, its habitat is Northern Europe. But how far north? – are there, for instance, elder-trees in Iceland? It would be a help if one could turn to books of reference, *John's Wild Flowers* and the *Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology* – all the books which one has never had time to read thoroughly. And why not? She could spend many winters in public reading-rooms, she might even get into the London Library.

Suddenly, too suddenly for surprise, she saw him. His back was toward her, he was leaning on a gate, contemplating a field of young wheat. When he turned round the aspect of that crop, so peacefully thriving, so nobly and classically elemental, was still mirrored in his quiet looks.

"Edmund!"

"Anastasia!"

They ran to each other, their feet noiseless on the turf. He had a wild rose in his buttonhole, in the shade of the trees his eyes, small and vivid, had the glitter of a sword in good condition.

"Did you get here alright?" he asked. In his voice was the exactly-remembered intonation, the slight rigour of mistrust, the erected solicitude of capability for one affectionately deemed incapable.

"Yes, I think so. Why? Have I lost my hat?"

Hearing their voices greet each other, tears of relief began to course down her face.

"It's such heaven to see you again, that's why I'm crying. But, Edmund – when I was in that car with Elfrida and Nancy they told me I was going to your funeral."

"Hush," he said. "Don't cry. It's perfectly all right. Curse those bitches, though, I always thought the Scotch were right about keeping women off funerals."

They stood close to each other, she could see every freckle on his nose, the scar where the falcon had pecked him. But still they had not touched. Now for it, she thought; and put out her hand, pressing it against his waistcoat. It did not go through.

"You're there!" she exclaimed, "you're really there! You are not a ghost. You are Edmund."

"You're Anastasia," he answered, "my ring-dove. But you look damned ill."

"It was thinking you were dead, and then that awful journey. It was hellish, Edmund, truly hellish. All the windows were shut, the car was swarming with sandwiches, and Elfrida and Nancy incessantly screeched. I thought I should never get out, but somehow the car fell to bits and I did. It was an accident, I suppose."

He stroked her cheek, looking at her with furious tenderness.

"The driver was nice, though. Quite young, and never said a word. Oh! I hope he wasn't killed, too."

"He'll be all right," he answered with assurance.

"And Elfrida and Nancy?"

"They're all right too, I expect." But he spoke with less fervour. He had never cared for his step-sisters.

"Edmund! Suppose they are *alive*! Suppose in a moment we hear them, coming after me, still talking. Can we hide?"

"They won't come here. But if they did, they wouldn't see us."

"Why? I can see you."

"We can see each other, we always shall. But generally speaking, ghosts are invisible."

And warming to a congenial theme he began to explain the rare concatenation of chances by which the dead are side-slipped from their safe invisibility. There must, for instance, be a certain wateriness in the air; the vicinity of a moat might do it, an exceptionally heavy dew, a sudden fall of the barometer; or a deeply-felt grief might exert the same embodying power as these.

"Like tears," she said. "If I had waved to you with my very wet handkerchief…"

He continued to explain. It was clearly one of those natural laws which it was important that she should grasp; and walking at his side, rubbing her check against his shoulder, she awaited the moment when a rhyme, one of his button-mushrooms, would emerge, and sum it up for her.

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Disclosure statement

I am reporting no potential conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 53.

2 Jacobs, "Sylvia Townsend Warner", 64.

3 Ibid., 74.

4 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 97-100.

5 Ibid., 126.

6 Ibid., 140.

7 Gottlieb, "'Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties'", 205-206.

8 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 45.

9 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 141.

10 Ibid., 152.

11 Warner et al., "International Peace Campaign".

12 Warner, *Summer Will Show*, 33.

13 Ibid., 47-48.

14 Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*, 7.

15 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 341.

16 Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 72-73.

17 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 342.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 343.

20 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 161.

21 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 341.

22 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 21.

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25 Ibid., 341.

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"Story with an Hypothesis": women and war in Sylvia Townsend Warner's forgotten short story

Originally published in a British interwar periodical, Sylvia Townsend Warner's short story, "Story with an Hypothesis" (1935), has never been collected. This critical introduction seeks to refocus attention on the story and argues for its importance in Warner's oeuvre as a transitional feminist text. "Story with an Hypothesis" reflects Warner's mid-1930s anxieties about war's likely effects on women and represents her recognition that the threat of war required women's liberation to be imagined and narrated differently. In the 1920s, much of Warner's work was characterized by what Mary Jacobs has called "fantastic ruralism", a mode of pastoral writing with which Warner imagined natural spaces as liberating women from urban, patriarchal modernity. This introduction argues that "Story with an Hypothesis" constitutes both an example of fantastic ruralism and a feminist dramatization of its limitations in an era of looming war. In its representation of its protagonist's failure to escape her militaristic partner's control, despite the liberating potential of its country setting, the story signals Warner's abandonment of fantastic ruralism and foreshadows her 1936 novel, *Summer Will Show*, in which women's liberation is contingent not on withdrawal into rural solitude, but on migration to the centre of political and social crisis.

Keywords: Sylvia Townsend Warner; women; war; interwar; feminism; short story

Introduction

In the mid-1930s, Sylvia Townsend Warner became increasingly concerned by the looming threat of war and its likely impact on women. Unlike the First World War, which was overwhelmingly fought on battlefields by men, the next war would put women's lives at risk in air raids on civilian targets. Warner developed a new narrative mode with which to imagine women's liberation in these years of rising masculine militarism. Abandoning her 1920s narratives, which imagined women's liberation as a withdrawal from patriarchal modernity into natural spaces, Warner envisaged liberation as depending upon women's political participation. She began this aesthetic process in

"Story with an Hypothesis", a short story that appeared in the February 1935 issue of *The London Mercury*, a British literary periodical.

A significant element of Warner's oeuvre, "Story with an Hypothesis" has nevertheless been neglected. It appeared neither in *A Garland of Straw* (1943), a collection that included many 1930s short stories, nor in any other collection published during her lifetime. Although Warner's fiction, like that of many British interwar women writers, was republished by Virago in the late 1970s, "Story with an Hypothesis" was not included in the publisher's *Selected Stories* (1990). (In fact, it has only been reprinted in one venue: the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter*, in 2003.)

The story's neglect is unfortunate, as it provides valuable insight into an important transitional phase in Warner's literary career. In its rural setting and depiction of Anastasia, a solitary woman engaging in a creative relationship to nature, "Story with an Hypothesis" has much in common with Warner's writing of the 1920s and early 1930s. However, Anastasia's domination by Edmund, a sinister figure associated throughout the text with war, departs from Warner's previous representations of natural spaces as sites of women's potential liberation. The story thus illustrates Warner's under-recognized convictions about how liberation should be imagined and narrated in a period characterized by war's looming threat.

Women's liberation and natural spaces

Warner's early focus on natural spaces and their liberatory potential for women developed partly from her own experience. Living in London in 1922, she visited the Essex Marshes for the first time. Her biographer, Claire Harman, has described this trip's profound effect on Warner's identity and creativity:

> The visit to the marshes marked a change in Sylvia; she felt, as she was to say later, that she had become properly her own person, having been till then "the creature of whoever I was with" […] In Essex that hot August she drew breath, took stock and in her mood of "passionate quiescence" was surprised by "the discovery that it was possible to write poetry". Her stay lasted a month, but the poetry continued to be "possible" all the rest of her life.[1]

Warner's solitary walking through the Essex marsh landscape enabled her to attain an autonomy and self-knowledge that life in London had not been able to provide. This process acted as a catalyst for Warner's literary creativity – her first poetry collection, *The Espalier*, would be published three years later in 1925, followed by her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, in 1926. In that novel, Laura Willowes, like her creator, liberates herself from London's stultifying modernity and moves to the rural Chilterns, where she achieves independence and freedom as a witch, deriving pleasure from a close relationship to the natural world.

Lolly Willowes exemplifies what Mary Jacobs calls Warner's "fantastic ruralism".[2] Arguing that this mode of writing characterized much of Warner's work between 1925 and 1934, Jacobs points to Warner's 1929 novel, *The True Heart*, to illustrate the difference between fantastic ruralism and other types of pastoral writing. Jacobs contends that the "shifting and liminal marsh landscape" in which *The True Heart* is set

> eludes containment by the fruitfulness and order of the Georgic vision. Those aspects of the text's representation of the rural imply a different politics in which gendered analysis and narrative experiment produce a fantastic ruralism at odds with a Georgic aesthetic.[3]

Warner's fantastic ruralism rejected the harmonious, though implicitly patriarchal, rural community imagined by the Georgic tradition, in favour of wilder natural spaces better suited to modernist explorations of women's experience. In *Lolly Willowes*, Laura's

escape from London is also an escape from the patriarchal control of her older brother, in whose household she lives as a "maiden aunt", and the freedom she secures for herself is threatened when her nephew, Titus, follows her to the Chilterns.

As well as these two 1920s novels, Jacobs also sees fantastic ruralism as characterizing Warner's poetry of the period, including *The Espalier*, her long narrative poem, *Opus 7* (1931), and *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1934), a collection jointly authored with her partner, Valentine Ackland. Warner's collaboration with Ackland on a fantastic ruralist text reflects the direction of the two women's lives: in 1930, they had withdrawn from London to a cottage in rural Dorset, where they lived happily for decades in a lesbian partnership.[4] Warner, the more successful writer, used *Whether a Dove or Seagull* as a way of getting Ackland's work into publication.[5] However, Ackland had an equally significant impact on Warner's career: it was she that first took an interest in the rise of fascism and the threat of war, alerting a hitherto relatively complacent Warner and beginning a process of aesthetic change.[6]

"Story with an Hypothesis" extends our understanding of Warner's fantastic ruralism. Anastasia, too, escapes from urban modernity (represented by the car), the speed and noise of which oppress her by making thought and memory impossible. Like Laura Willowes, she finds freedom in the countryside's quiet stillness, also resembling her fictional precursor in her knowledge of botany and folk wisdom. However, the ending of "Story with an Hypothesis" diverges from earlier instances of Warner's fantastic ruralism by placing Anastasia back under Edmund's patriarchal control. The natural world no longer provides a liberatory space for women. This shift reflects Warner's anxieties about the rising threat of war in the mid-1930s.

War's new threat to women

Fears about fascism's rise in Europe and the likelihood of another war increased with

Hitler's coming to power in Germany in 1933. Interwar British women knew that any future war would have new gendered consequences, as noted by the historian Julie Gottlieb:

> The female experience came to be differentiated from the male in so far as the whole rhetoric and mindset was dominated by the views that […] women and children would be at once the more vulnerable and defenceless in the face of modern warfare (the bomber will always get through).[7]

Total war's targeting of civilians, witnessed for the first time in Abyssinia from 1935 and Spain from 1936, meant primarily the targeting by men of women and the children for whom they cared. Further, British women remained excluded from the armed forces, preventing them from military participation.[8]

This political context sharpened Warner's opposition to war and fascism. Early in 1935 she and Ackland joined the Communist Party and immediately became involved in political activism.[9] For Warner, much of this activism had an anti-war orientation: in June 1936 she was elected Secretary of the Dorset Peace Council and, in September that year, was a delegate to an international peace congress in Brussels.[10] Warner signed an open letter to the feminist weekly, *Time and Tide*, which was also signed by other prominent writers including Rose Macaulay, Rebecca West and the pacifist Aldous Huxley, which emphasized the dangers faced by largely helpless non-combatants:

> It is on civilians that war will in future have its most lethal effect. Danger they will face, but danger against which they can take no stimulating action. They will merely be poisoned, burned, blown to pieces, buried under heaps of masonry, or starved.[11]

Here, the word "civilians" is ungendered, but to Warner and other interwar women it would have been clear who the majority of those civilians would be.

These new threats to women saw Warner turn away from fantastic ruralism and toward new ways of imagining and narrating women's liberation. Her 1936 historical novel, *Summer Will Show*, features a Victorian-era protagonist, Sophia Willoughby, who seeks liberation from her respectable life as a member of the Dorset gentry (she holds sole responsibility for raising her children and running her estate, while her irresponsible husband is in Paris with his mistress). Like Laura Willowes before her, Sophia first seeks release from stifling domesticity in the English countryside, when she escorts her nephew to boarding school in Cornwall:

> There was no doubt that, in some unsuspected way, she could have been very happy at Trebennick. That air, so pure and earthy, absolved one back into animal, washed off all recollection of responsibilities; one waft of wind there would blow away the cares from one's mind, the petticoats from one's legs, demolish all the muffle of imposed personality loaded upon one by other people, leaving one free, swift, unburdened as a fox.[12]

The fox simile suggests that closeness to the natural world may result in liberation and autonomy for Sophia, freeing her from restrictions placed on her life by gendered social roles (pointedly represented by the metaphor of petticoats restricting her legs' movement). However, Sophia's attempt to find freedom in Cornwall, when she decides on a whim to spend a day walking alone in the countryside, is frustrated:

> She had still more than an hour of liberty before she must remember the second train and walk back; yet already a liberty in which she had nothing to do was irksome to her. Should she walk further, paddle her feet in the stream? The one was pointless, the other childish. It was boring to be a woman, nothing that one did had any meat in it […] The stream kept her company down the valley, an idle influence, turning no mill-wheels, running happily to waste. She had drunk of it; but she could not drink of its brilliant peace.[13]

Rather than finding liberation in her rare, solitary experience of nature, Sophia finds

only dissatisfaction. Like the stream that runs freely but doesn't turn mill-wheels, Sophia herself is without purpose or usefulness beyond the social roles prescribed to upper-class women: child-rearing and the day-to-day running of her household. To find true liberation from patriarchal society, Sophia must leave the countryside behind for the revolutionary Paris of 1848. There, she falls in love with her husband's mistress, Minna, a bohemian revolutionary and storyteller. In the urban tumult of Paris, Sophia liberates herself sexually and socially, abandoning her old life for a lesbian partnership with Minna and a new existence as a communist.

Summer Will Show left behind the fantastic ruralism of Warner's earlier work because it could no longer address the most urgent causes of women's oppression under the looming threat of total war in the mid-1930s. Sophia achieves liberation not by withdrawing into remote natural spaces to live a creative, solitary life, but by migrating to the centre of political and social crisis, to participate in building a better world. To address the effects of war and extreme nationalism on women, Warner had to imagine and narrate forms of liberation that were communal and participatory, not solitary and detached. Refocusing attention on "Story with an Hypothesis" is important because it dramatizes this reorientation in Warner's work: it is both an example of fantastic ruralism and a text that exposes its limitations. This reorientation reflects new attempts in the 1930s to combine politics and aesthetics in what Nick Hubble calls 'proletarian literature', which focussed

> on the intersubjective connections between the worker and people of other classes. Sometimes these others were the upper-middle-class men of the Auden Generation who had 'gone over' to the side of the workers and the books were written from their perspective.[14]

In its depiction of Sophia's social descent into the Paris masses, *Summer Will Show* shares similarities with books by upper-middle-class male writers, such as George

Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). However, Warner's novel differs from such books by analysing gendered social relations, as well as class-based ones, reflecting an intersectional approach that characterised novels such as Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) and (as Hubble argues) Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (1935).

The countryside, militarism and patriarchal control

The fantastic ruralist elements of "Story with an Hypothesis" cohere around Anastasia. The story begins with her relief at leaving the car, the text's primary symbol of modernity. Anastasia imagines herself "expanded and immemorial as the trees above her, rooted in quiet grass like them",[15] a striking echo of *Lolly Willowes*, in which Laura, in an epiphanic moment, finds her desire weighing "upon her like the load of ripened fruit upon a tree […] She seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass".[16] As Anastasia enters the woods, her sense of freedom is immediate: "Without much interest but with a certain sense of elation, her mind began to frame projects and flip them away again. There was really a considerable choice of what to do next".[17] This sense of autonomy, possibility, and happiness leads to creative engagement with the natural world around her. Coming across a flower she doesn't know, she invents a simile for it: "Edmund would know its name, a tiny white flower, a fine speckle of blossom like the stars in the Milky Way".[18] Anastasia substitutes the flower's name for an imaginative association between small and enormous natural phenomena, identifying objects separated in space with one another.

During her walk, Anastasia again makes identifications across spatial distances, which have the potential to address rising militarism and nationalism. The sight of an elder tree inspires connections between Norse mythology, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, and the elder tree's medicinal properties and etymology. Then, recalling

botanical information about the tree, she reflects that "its habitat is Northern Europe. But how far north? – are there, for instance, elder-trees in Iceland?"[19] Drawing on Scandinavian literature and imagining a natural habitat stretching from Norfolk to Iceland, Anastasia subverts the political borders that were, in 1935, the subject of intensified policing and contestation. Here, Anastasia diverges from Laura Willowes, who, as Jane Garrity notes, "consolidates her Englishness through identification with the beauty of the landscape".[20] Rather than reinforcing her national identity, Anastasia imagines a shared culture and natural environment extending across northern Europe, through her solitary engagement with the Norfolk countryside.

However, the story's fantastic ruralism and its potential for addressing the threat war posed to women are brought to an end by Edmund's sudden appearance. Throughout the story, Anastasia associates Edmund with interwar militarism in various ways. Anastasia recalls him talking "often of his native county, his finger trudging over ordnance maps, showing her where, one day, they would go to visit together the places of his boyhood".[21] Edmund's use of cartographic representations to understand Norfolk, which contrasts with Anastasia's immersion of herself in its countryside, gestures towards maps' popularity in interwar Britain, which Garrity relates to militarism and imperialism:

> We see evidence of the map's links with rapaciousness and war during the interwar period in Britain's map-selling boom, which was fuelled by public anxiety surrounding the rise of militarism. The prominent geographer Vaughan Cornish intended that his book *A Geography of Imperial Defence* (1922) be read by both the military specialist and the layman, for "Imperial Military Geography" was "eminently a Citizen's Subject". Indeed, the geography textbook series that British schoolchildren studied during the interwar years, *The Conquest Geographies*, featured maps that represented a decidedly Anglocentric perspective on global dominance and control.[22]

The map's association with empire, borders and military power links this memory of Edmund to another one, in which, while Anastasia was playing on a Norfolk beach as a child, Edmund was "stumping out with his first gun".[23] While Anastasia's relationship to nature subverts political borders by establishing cultural and botanical continuities, Edmund's reinforces them: he understands the countryside, through representations of it, as territory to be demarcated and plundered for its resources. In this context, we can understand the simile Warner uses to describe Edmund when he first appears: "in the shade of the trees his eyes, small and vivid, had the glitter of a sword in good condition".[24] Edmund's eyes, weapon-like, view the world in a warlike way.

Anastasia's liberation by the Norfolk countryside, as well as the imaginative associations she develops through engagement with it, cannot withstand Edmund's presence. He immediately subordinates her to his control, closing down the sense of freedom and possibility she had enjoyed alone. Warner represents this tension through modernist use of free indirect discourse. Although the story begins in a conventional third-person narrative mode, a shift takes place when Anastasia begins her walk: "A little farther along the road stood a cottage, and from the cottage came a smell of frying onions. It must be lunch-time, midday probably, since cottage people eat early".[25] The equivocal nature of the second sentence ("must", "probably") indicates that we are no longer in an omniscient narrator's presence, but are inhabiting Anastasia's subjectivity as readers. However, when she meets Edmund, conventional third-person narration resumes, obscuring Anastasia's interiority. She becomes an object, onto which Edmund is able to impose "facts, which he considered of importance".[26] Anastasia's creative and imaginative impulses are shut down, and she ends the story listening to Edmund expound on the conditions by which ghosts can become visible to the living. An example of Warner's dry feminist wit, this ending satirizes the male propensity to

analyse the world in positivist terms by having Edmund treat the supernatural as a scientific phenomenon.

In "Story with an Hypothesis", the liberatory potential of Warner's fantastic ruralism is foreshortened by the entry of a masculine, militaristic presence into the natural space of its setting. Edmund renders temporary Anastasia's sense of freedom and possibility, which makes possible imaginative acts that could challenge militarism, ensuring that she passively accepts his understanding of the (super)natural world. By 1935, Warner found that narratives of withdrawal into nature were no longer adequate to the task of imagining women's freedom and autonomy, which, menaced by new threats of war, required new narratives of social and political participation.

"Story with an Hypothesis" by Sylvia Townsend Warner

After the noise and speed of the car – a speed that was rendered trifling and unreal by the car being a closed car – the stillness of the country road was quite extraordinary. It was as though the whole world were standing still – a solid and positive stillness, an everlasting element in which trees grew and flowers were plaited among the wayside grasses.

The place where she had so abruptly quitted the car was a long stretch of road with wide grassy margins. A double row of irregularly spaced trees made it almost as formal as an avenue, and the tall stone park gate at the end of the perspective corroborated this aspect of what was, in truth, but a straight stretch of unfrequented road in Norfolk. "Somewhere near Cromer," she said to herself, looking about her. But after all that was only a guess; she had really no notion where she was. During the long drive she had remained quite indifferent to the country through which she was conveyed, except once or twice, when a name on a signpost had signalled itself to her memory as a name which she had heard spoken by Edmund. He talked often of his native county, his

finger trudging over ordnance maps, showing her where, one day, they would go to visit together the places of his boyhood.

But names then, they were still only names. The car hastened on, the by-roads were swept aside by its speed, the continuous conversation kept up by Elfrida and Nancy overlaid any stir of memory, any quickening of thought.

Now the utmost she could say to herself was, "Somewhere in North Norfolk, somewhere near Cromer," Cromer she knew. At the time when Edmund was stumping out with his first gun she, with her spade and bucket had played, intently and stealthily, as solitary children play, on that chilly beach. The summer following the tide of holiday had cast her upon another strand, and from that day to this she had not set foot in Norfolk.

A little farther along the road stood a cottage, and from the cottage came a smell of frying onions. It must be lunch-time, midday probably, since cottage people eat early. Time, though, troubled her as little as place. All her sense of being was absorbed in the relief of being out of that car, alone, in this world that stood so still. She seemed to herself expanded and immemorial as the trees above her, rooted in quiet grass like them, like them secure from human cares and human conversation.

For how those two women had talked! Zealously, brightly, ruthlessly keeping up their conversation, so that she, staring at the red, hair-prickled neck of the hired driver had thought of his silence as of a garden into which she might gaze but could never enter.

Well, they were gone! Recalling the driver, so red, and young, and sturdy, she felt a momentary pang, but she could feel no regret for Elfrida and Nancy. They were gone, she had escaped them, and was, as far as she could gather, free – free, should she please to do, to do as she pleased. The motionless world was before her, and all this

motionless day, poised on its midsummer noon. For it was the Eve of Saint John, when one could gather fern-seed and walk invisible.

Without much interest but with a certain sense of elation, as though she had come into a pair of wings, her mind began to frame projects and flip them away again. There was really a considerable choice of what to do next. She might, for instance, enter a lunatic asylum and settle down there. She would be perfectly inoffensive, and a long unmolested leisure in which to study lunatics might be very tolerable. Or some sort of nocturnal nature study might be entertaining. She might slide herself into a bird sanctuary – there was one in Norfolk, Edmund had spoken of it, called Horsey Mere. To sleep all day and watch birds at night, there was nothing in that which people could object to, and the nocturnal behaviour of birds is a subject little explored. Or, of course, like so many others in her position, she might travel.

Meanwhile, she began to walk down a small track which led across the grass margin of the road towards a plantation. It was the sort of path just kept going by the usage of, perhaps, a dozen people a week – children birds'-nesting or brambling, a woman gathering an apronful of sticks, a gamekeeper, a tramp. Their usage had not been enough to tread out the flower growing underfoot. Edmund would know its name, a tiny white flower, a fine speckle of blossom like the stars in the Milky Way.

The plantation thickened about her, but the path kept on, small and steadfast. Looking back she saw it receding from her heels. "It follows me like a tame wild animal," she thought.

There were a number of young poplars, their leaves lined with woolly silver. The smell of their bark was pungent under the sun, a smell at once savage and innocent. The larger, more separate stars of stitchwort spangled the grass on either side of the track, a few dog-roses were still in bloom, bleached by the sun.

It was astonishingly silent. But one could not expect bird-song now, for the elder-tree was in bloom; and *Between elder-blossom and elder-fruit birds are mostly mute.* That was one of the rhymes so unexpectedly made up by Edmund to impress on her memory facts, which he considered of importance. They came out of him, round, sudden, unexpected and complete; like button-mushrooms. And all around the button-mushroom the surface remained exactly as it had been, so that no one looking at Edmund would surmise for a moment that he was capable of poetry.

"Mostly mute," she said aloud, staring at the elder-tree, so luxuriantly in flower, foaming out on every side with its exact, lace-pattern, flat-faced bucklers of yellow-white blossom. Under the blossom and the dark-green leaves were the elder-wands, the straight rods of this year's growth, whose outer pith could be delicately peeled off with a knife, leaving a pattern of green and white. Country lovers would make such wands for their young women, spending an hour, maybe, incising the pattern, breathing heavily, with pursed lips. There was a quantity of most promising wands in this bush, long, straight, unknuckled, as they should be. She hoped that some young man would bring his young lady here and make her an elder-wand.

She walked on, but the scent of the elder-blossom followed her; and she set her mind to recollect all the things she knew about the elder tree. Wine and jelly can be made of the fruit, a face-wash from the blossom, steeped in spring-water; and from the dried blossoms a tea can be distilled, which is said to cure colds and fevers, this was the tea made for the little boy in Hans Christian Andersen, among the fumes of which the Elder-Tree Mother appeared and told stories to the sick child. Hulda, or Hildre, a Norse Goddess; and in Norfolk the elder is called hilder to this day.

How true it was that one should collect as much miscellaneous information as possible, storing it away against the hour of need! – from these casual musings on the

elder-tree she had plaited herself something like comfort. Yes, this was undoubtedly what people meant when they spoke of the pleasures of memory. To those who have endless time to pass away and dare not think too near to heart, such fragments of information, however slight, however childish, were a blessing indeed – could be woven, as tufts of moss and oddments of hair and feathers are woven to line a birds' nest, into a warm kind of cubby-hole for the mind.

"A remedy in every hedge, either for sickness or wound." So Evelyn had written of the elder, kind tree! Nor had she yet exhausted its virtues, she could stay a little longer under its shelter, although the two vistas of Hans Christian Andersen and Northern mythology opened so promisingly between its branches. She could consider it botanically. Its leaves are pinnate, its blossoms of the order called cyme, its habitat is Northern Europe. But how far north? – are there, for instance, elder-trees in Iceland? It would be a help if one could turn to books of reference, *John's Wild Flowers* and the *Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology* – all the books which one has never had time to read thoroughly. And why not? She could spend many winters in public reading-rooms, she might even get into the London Library.

Suddenly, too suddenly for surprise, she saw him. His back was toward her, he was leaning on a gate, contemplating a field of young wheat. When he turned round the aspect of that crop, so peacefully thriving, so nobly and classically elemental, was still mirrored in his quiet looks.

"Edmund!"

"Anastasia!"

They ran to each other, their feet noiseless on the turf. He had a wild rose in his buttonhole, in the shade of the trees his eyes, small and vivid, had the glitter of a sword in good condition.

“Did you get here alright?” he asked. In his voice was the exactly-remembered intonation, the slight rigour of mistrust, the erected solicitude of capability for one affectionately deemed incapable.

“Yes, I think so. Why? Have I lost my hat?”

Hearing their voices greet each other, tears of relief began to course down her face.

“It’s such heaven to see you again, that’s why I’m crying. But, Edmund – when I was in that car with Elfrida and Nancy they told me I was going to your funeral.”

“Hush,” he said. “Don’t cry. It’s perfectly all right. Curse those bitches, though, I always thought the Scotch were right about keeping women off funerals.”

They stood close to each other, she could see every freckle on his nose, the scar where the falcon had pecked him. But still they had not touched. Now for it, she thought; and put out her hand, pressing it against his waistcoat. It did not go through.

“You’re there!” she exclaimed, “you’re really there! You are not a ghost. You are Edmund.”

“You’re Anastasia,” he answered, “my ring-dove. But you look damned ill.”

“It was thinking you were dead, and then that awful journey. It was hellish, Edmund, truly hellish. All the windows were shut, the car was swarming with sandwiches, and Elfrida and Nancy incessantly screeched. I thought I should never get out, but somehow the car fell to bits and I did. It was an accident, I suppose.”

He stroked her cheek, looking at her with furious tenderness.

“The driver was nice, though. Quite young, and never said a word. Oh! I hope he wasn’t killed, too.”

“He’ll be all right,” he answered with assurance.

“And Elfrida and Nancy?”

"They're all right too, I expect." But he spoke with less fervour. He had never cared for his step-sisters.

"Edmund! Suppose they are *alive*! Suppose in a moment we hear them, coming after me, still talking. Can we hide?"

"They won't come here. But if they did, they wouldn't see us."

"Why? I can see you."

"We can see each other, we always shall. But generally speaking, ghosts are invisible."

And warming to a congenial theme he began to explain the rare concatenation of chances by which the dead are side-slipped from their safe invisibility. There must, for instance, be a certain wateriness in the air; the vicinity of a moat might do it, an exceptionally heavy dew, a sudden fall of the barometer; or a deeply-felt grief might exert the same embodying power as these.

"Like tears," she said. "If I had waved to you with my very wet handkerchief…"

He continued to explain. It was clearly one of those natural laws which it was important that she should grasp; and walking at his side, rubbing her check against his shoulder, she awaited the moment when a rhyme, one of his button-mushrooms, would emerge, and sum it up for her.

Disclosure statement

I am reporting no potential conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 53.

2 Jacobs, "Sylvia Townsend Warner", 64.

3 Ibid., 74.

4 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 97-100.

5 Ibid., 126.

6 Ibid., 140.

7 Gottlieb, "'Broken Friendships and Vanished Loyalties'", 205-206.

8 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 45.

9 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 141.

10 Ibid., 152.

11 Warner et al., "International Peace Campaign".

12 Warner, *Summer Will Show*, 33.

13 Ibid., 47-48.

14 Hubble, *The Proletarian Answer to the Modernist Question*, 7.

15 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 341.

16 Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, 72-73.

17 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 342.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 343.

20 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 161.

21 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 341.

22 Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, 21.

23 Warner, "Story with an Hypothesis", 341.

24 Ibid., 343.

25 Ibid., 341.

26 Ibid., 342.

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